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## ROBERT KOEHLER, PAINTER

A German by birth, family, and traditions, Robert Koehler passed his boyhood and school days in Milwaukee, and several years as an art student in other parts of the United States. He considered himself an American and a Western man until he returned to Germany, where, to his surprise, he found himself altogether at home.

The associations of childhood and youth are strong, but so also are racial instincts and the ties of kindred and fatherland. The result of a boyhood and youth spent in America, and an early manhood spent in European capitals, with the divergent and various experiences attending life at home and abroad, gave him the outlook and philosophy of the cosmopolitan without robbing him of his German birthright of strength, energy, and integrity.



ROBERT KOEHLER

His work is like himself. It has versatility and it has integrity. No matter what the subject, whether figure-painting, marine or landscape, a study from life or an ideal composition—what-

ever other qualities it may have or may lack, it is sure to possess strength and integrity.

As has been the case with so many artists, Mr. Koehler's student days were days of toil and struggle. Obligated to depend on himself, he was, almost at the outset of his career, threatened with loss of eyesight. Happily a surgical operation averted this calamity, but he was hampered by other physical limitations. Undaunted by any obstacle, and taking for his motto, "It's dogged as does it," he fought his way step by step, studying in New York until he was fitted to enter the Royal Academy at Munich, when quite unexpectedly a patron paid his expenses to Germany and supported him there two years or more.

Mr. Koehler's favorite master at the Munich school was Dufregger, one of the three great *genre* painters of the time, and yet, though he was his pupil four or five years, he never copied his studies, nor was he perceptibly influenced by them. The



STILL LIFE  
By Robert Koehler

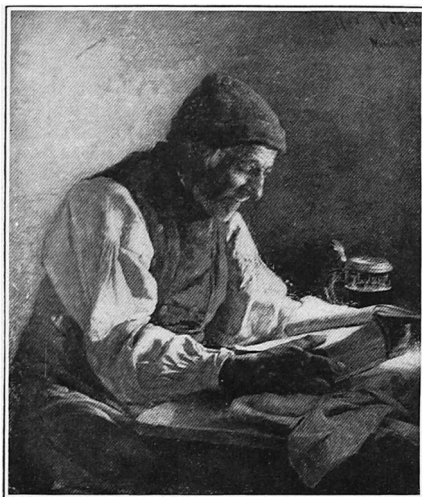
point of view of the pupil was not and could not become that of the master. Koehler had used his eyes and his understanding to such purpose in the New World as to prohibit his making a fresh start with the perceptions of the Old World. And yet to his rigorous training in the Royal Academy he owes his good draftsmanship, his facility in strong modeling, and his general excellence in technique.

He was humorously regarded by Dufregger as incorrigible in a sense and allowed to go his own way. The composition of his picture "The Strike" was a notable instance. The sketch, approved by the master, showed a level ground with the workmen in revolt advancing in phalanx, the leader addressing the capitalist respectfully with cap in hand. Koehler felt that while that might represent the European ideal strike, the American reality was something very different. The picture, as completed, was awarded honorable mention at the Exposition Universelle, Paris, in 1889, and has this summer become the property of the city of Minneapolis, having been purchased by the general subscriptions of the citizens.

Nor is Mr. Koehler's work confined to a single class of subjects. Perhaps his forte lies in figure-painting, but he paints much in the open air, and landscape enters largely into his compositions. Strength is the dominant chord in all his work, delicacy sometimes, but mere prettiness never.



ROBERT KOEHLER'S STUDIO AND RESIDENCE



HOLIDAY OCCUPATION  
By Robert Koehler

excellent, and the heads and faces are modeled with firmness. He has painted a few pictures that tell a story, but in these there is nothing of the melodramatic.

"A Holiday Occupation" for strong effect is perhaps the most noteworthy of his single-figure pieces. Though it is a good bit of color, the color is subservient to the pose, which is strong. The ruddy peasant complexion is thrown out finely by the dark cap and greenish gray background. The winning quality of this picture of the Bible-reading peasant is its naturalness, and the sentiment is wholesome and good. "A Holiday Occupation" is in the Temple collection of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia.

By way of contrast,

To him, from his student days onward, truth, sincerity, purpose, were what one should strive to express, unhampered by formula or conventions. One has well said, "A mind that bothers itself largely with conventionalities, rarely discloses much originality, and a painter without convictions never plows deep in art."

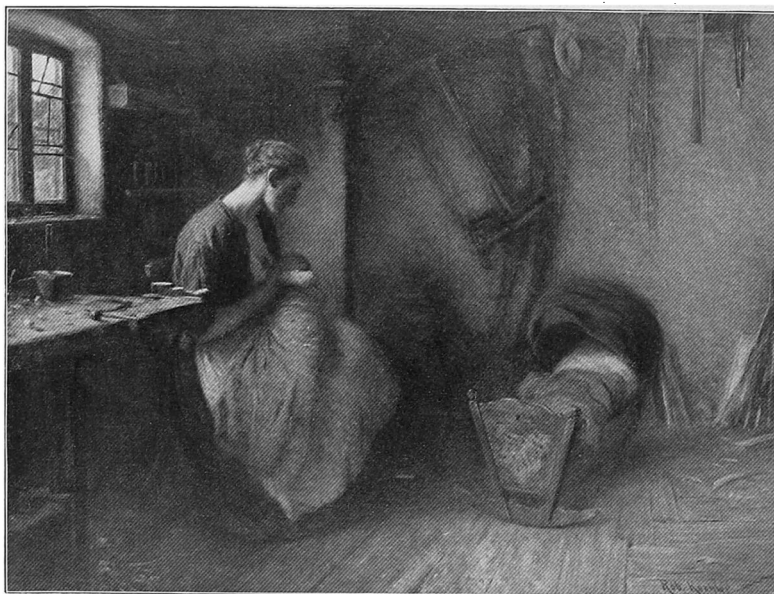
Koehler's men are positive and sturdy, and his women strong and good. In portraits, he never paints the "column and curtain" picture. His groups, which are many, are well composed, and whatever the color scheme, rich or subdued, the draftsmanship is



JUDGMENT OF PARIS  
By Robert Koehler

"Violet" is a refined bit of work. It is a study in white. The background is white, as is the gown, and there is a white fur rug, but the whites are warm and soft. A knot of wild flowers in the black and white lace on the bosom, and the drooping pose of the figure, suggest the title.

"A Spanish Nobleman" has been called his best work. It is



THE CARPENTER'S FAMILY

By Robert Koehler

certainly strong in modeling and good in color. The face and hands are the accented parts.

Mr. Koehler's versatility has been mentioned. Is it a virtue or a drawback that no two of his pictures are alike in subject? The quality of strength pervades them all, but in composition, coloring, and treatment they differ. His work may be said to emphasize his moods. "Salve Luna" is really the expression of a mood. He tries to be true to nature as nature manifests herself to him. He can interpret only as far as he himself knows. He cannot see with others' eyes, nor work to others' rule. He never painted a picture to order. He felt that it would be a failure. Neither could he paint for popularity, nor follow a subject with the single object of sale in view.

Figure-painting is his specialty, but the subjects which appeal to



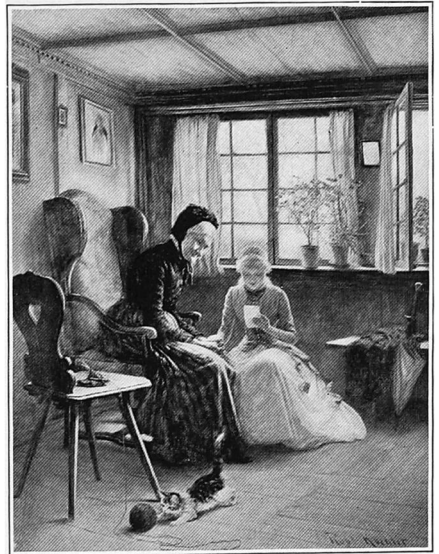
VIOLET

By Robert Koehler

Strike'' were exhibited at the World's Fair, in Chicago. "Her Only Support" was purchased for the original George I. Seney collection in New York.

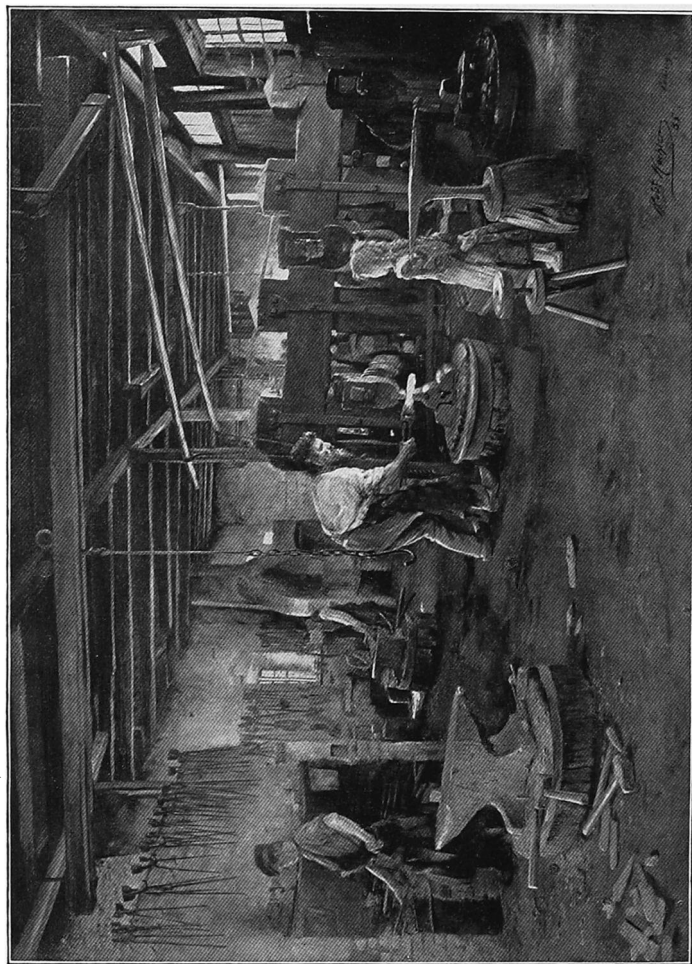
"The Strike," as conceived by Mr. Koehler, is not an argument against the encroachments of capital, or in favor of the rights of labor; nor was it painted to commemorate an episode, but to represent a phase of American life—a phase which presented itself to Mr. Koehler during his residence in various factory cities. The aim of

him are workingmen, men at labor, at bench, at forge, in the open air—subjects full of strength and vitality and calling for strong treatment. "The Socialist," one of his earlier efforts, has been much commented on for its quality of crude vigor. "In a Bavarian Smithy" is another study of the workingman, as is also "Twenty Minutes for Refreshments." "The Carpenter's Family" shows some of Mr. Koehler's very best work in modeling and technique. The woman's head and the window light and background are fine. "In a Café," "The Carpenter's Family," and "The



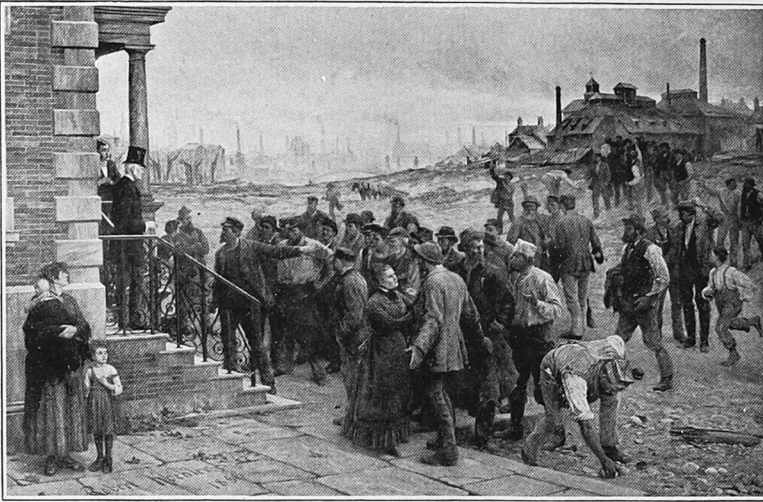
LOVE'S SECRET

By Robert Koehler



BAVARIAN SMITHY  
By Robert Koehler

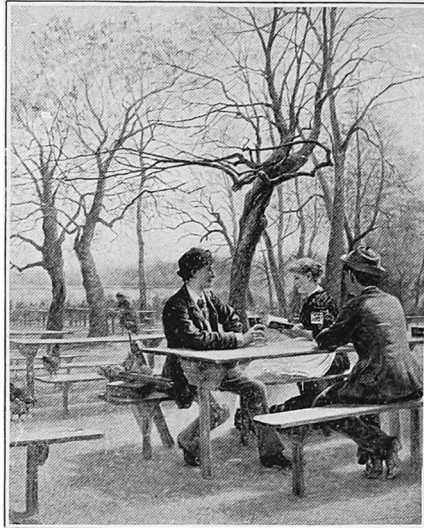




THE STRIKE  
By Robert Koehler

the artist was legitimate, and the result was successful, and neither purpose nor achievement requires an apologist. The work is excellent.

The illuminators and miniature-painters were the historians and the only historians of the Dark Ages. They pictured what they saw of the daily life about them—the implements, dress, industries, ceremonials, and employments of their contemporaries. What they recorded is invaluable, because it is all that has been preserved to tell of mediæval times. The soldier-painters succeeded the illuminators, and then came the peasant-painters. All have been good as far as they have been true. In America this is an age of industry, of invention, and alas! of strug-

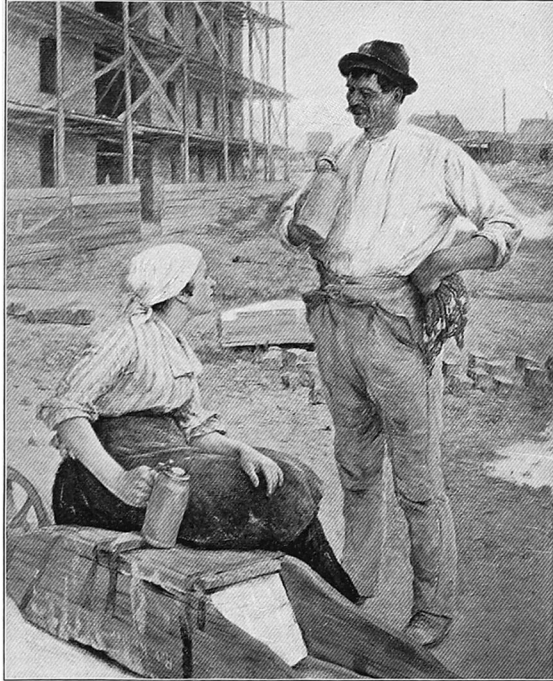


THE FIRST GUESTS  
By Robert Koehler



gle and strife for social and financial supremacy. Robert Koehler says, "We can do no better than to paint what we see and know, and what appeals to us. This I have done, and this I more than ever feel that I must do."

Mr. Koehler came to Minnesota some eight or ten years ago to become director of the Minneapolis School of Fine Arts, a position



TWENTY MINUTES FOR REFRESHMENTS

By Robert Koehler

he continues to hold. While faithful in the discharge of his duties to the school, he has done much besides. He has identified himself with the life of the community, and by lectures, writings, and the organization of local art clubs, has done much to create and foster a love for art. He has given collective exhibitions of his own work, and to his influence and efforts are due the annual exhibitions of the work of contemporary artists held in Minneapolis.

His brother painters of the East and of Europe thought him a brave if not a reckless man to settle in so new a place, ruled as it was by the spirit of trade instead of by the spirit of art. But who shall say he has not chosen wisely when the Minneapolis of to-day is compared with the Minneapolis of a generation ago? In the sixties we were defending ourselves against the Indians—to-day we are building art galleries and public libraries, buying pictures, and erecting statues.

There are those who regret that Mr. Koehler has not given these later years to creative work instead of to teaching, but let us remem-

ber that the art of learning from learners did not die with the old Greek schoolmasters, and it is quite probable that his brush may have acquired a surer touch, and his style a greater distinction, from his criticism of the work of others.

It is certain he has been accumulating a wealth of material for future use. The strenuous and unique life in this great section of the Northwest, its harvesters, elevators and millers, its freight boats, its road-makers and bridge-builders, its river boatmen, lake fishers, ice-cutters, and woodsmen, have not been studied in vain, and very soon, perhaps when opportunity of leisure shall arrive, we know that his future will not merely "copy fair his past," but will richly fulfill its promise. In electing to become the painter of common folk and common scenes in and about his Northwestern



AT THE CAFE  
By Robert Koehler

home, Mr. Koehler undertakes to depict a strong, virile life that will ever have a place in legitimate art. Such pictures as this life affords may not always be winsome, may rarely be decorative; but they are clean, wholesome, and touched with the right sentiment. One palls of the merely pretty in art, and longs for exemplifications of vigor, character, the wilds man seeks to conquer, and the lines of care and toil that result from his efforts. It is these subjects that Mr. Koehler's experience fits him to portray, and it is in these that we may expect him to attain his future successes. CHARLOTTE WHITCOMB.